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12 April 1988

# U.S. Reported to Blame Colonel For Honduran Delay During Riot

*Military Police Chief Called Friend of Drug Suspect*

By Loren Jenkins  
Washington Post Foreign Service

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras, April 11—U.S. officials are blaming the chief of Honduran military security, Col. Leonel Riera Lunatti, for delays in sending help to the mob-besieged U.S. Consulate Thursday, according to Honduran and foreign sources here.

Riera, a disappointed candidate two years ago for the post of chief of the Honduran armed forces, is described as a friend of alleged drug kingpin Juan Ramon Matta Ballesteros, whose surprise arrest here and dispatch to the United States last Tuesday touched off the riots.

U.S. officials have stated on the record that a note protesting the police response was sent to the "highest levels" of the government, presumably President Jose Azcona. No further statement has been made on that issue.

But sources said embassy officials were still angry that repeated calls to Riera for help drew no response for two hours.

Even then, by this account, the embassy was not informed that help was on the way. Five Hondurans died in the riot.

U.S. officials digging through the charred consulate building and 20 blackened cars in the parking lot estimated the damage at \$4 million to \$6 million and said they would ask the Honduran government to pay. The embassy, across the street, was not damaged.

Riera, informed sources said, apparently did not alert the armed forces chief, Gen. Humberto Regalado Hernandez, of the repeated U.S. calls for assistance.

U.S. officials who are normally in contact with Riera are understood to have asked him for an explanation and were not happy with the answers they got.

He reportedly said that he could not act until the collegial leadership of the Army had determined that he should do so.

Riera did not respond to this reporter's efforts to reach him.

A popular theory here among diplomats and Honduran analysts on Riera's motivations is that, like the rioters, he had been unhappy with the way Matta was arrested at U.S. bidding and delivered to U.S. federal marshals, despite the fact that the Honduran constitution prohibits extradition.

Many Hondurans look on Matta, 42, as a kind of Robin Hood because he spread his money around to help the indigent.

He was arrested in a top-secret military operation as he returned to his mansion from a morning jog, was whisked to a plane at the nearby international airport and flown to the Dominican Republic—where

he was put on another plane bound for the United States and arrested.

U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration officials have said Matta was the second most important man in a vast cocaine-smuggling syndicate, known as the Medellin Cartel for the Colombian city at the heart of its operations.

He is also suspected of involvement in the 1985 killing in Mexico of American DEA agent Enrique Camarena Salazar.

Matta, since fleeing a Colombian jail in 1986—reportedly bribing his way to freedom—lived openly here.

It is rumored that he paid money to Hondurans in government and the military to ensure against his having to face drug counts in the United States.

Matta's arrest was such a secret operation, informed sources said, that only a few trusted commanders in the Honduran armed forces top command were allowed to know about it—lest someone sympathetic to or in the pay of Matta tip him off.

The secrecy was such that not even the military units used have been identified here, prompting new rumors that Matta was captured by U.S. and not Honduran agents. U.S. officials deny the reports.

One key commander who was not informed of the impending action on Matta was Riera, the commander of the military security police.

Normally, Riera's men would have carried out the arrests.

Given the tradition that all major command decisions here are made collegially by the 55-man Superior Council of military commanders, Riera could be expected to be put out by the fact that such an important operation was decided without the council, or Riera, being consulted.

That alone could be one motive for Riera dragging his feet Thursday night while the consulate burned, said a European diplomat here. "He may have felt the U.S. should suffer for the way in which they acted against Matta."

Riera is reported to have been seen frequently at parties at the luxurious home of Matta, the drug baron.

Defenders of Riera insist that attending such parties does not mean that he was ensnared by Matta.

After all, they point out, Tegucigalpa is a small city where just about everyone knows everyone else, especially those with money or power.

However, many Hondurans, considering themselves in the know when the subject is brought up and in hushed tones tell of low-paid officers, such as Riera, sharing in the munificence of men such as Matta.